



News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Volunteers, Mules and a Helicopter

National Guard Helicopter To Lift Multi-Use Trail Bridge into Place

Airlift Finishes 11-Year Job by Dozens of Volunteers

The final section of a long-awaited recreational trail system near Millerton Lake State Recreation Area will be lifted into place this coming weekend, **Saturday, June 9**, by a California National Guard Blackhawk helicopter.

In placing three bridge sections into place over the rugged, Big Sandy Creek, the helicopter will finish an 11-year effort by dozens of volunteers and a caravan of mules to complete an 18-mile trail system through the Sierra foothills.

Mark Holland, Vice President and Trail Construction Coordinator of Central California Off-Road Cyclist and the club's representative to the San Joaquin River Trail Council has been the Big Sandy Bridge Project Manager for the past 11 years. Said Holland: "After 4,100 volunteer hours, the event we have all been waiting for has finally arrived. This section of trail is considered to be one of Central California's premier trails because of its year-round accessibility and users of all levels can enjoy everything it has to offer."

See Press Coordinating Instructions and Airlift Schedule at end of Release

Once installed, this bridge will connect portions of the San Joaquin River Trail, providing an uninterrupted trail opportunity of approximately 18 miles between Sky Harbor Road within the MLSRA, USBR and BLM's San Joaquin River Gorge Management Area. Eventually, the San Joaquin River Trail will connect Highway 99 in the Central Valley to the headwaters of the San Joaquin River, near the Devil's Postpile National Monument, a total distance of approximately 100 miles.

"With the completion of the bridge crossing over the Big Sandy Creek," said Steve Haze, President of the San Joaquin River Trail Council and Sierra Foothill Conservancy representative, "state and federal recreational areas will now, for the first time, be linked

together with an all-year, multi-use trail that allows hikers, equestrians and mountain bike enthusiasts to enjoy one of the largest recreational resources in the San Joaquin Valley.”

The airlift by the National Guard is needed because the bridge site is in a very rugged canyon area and only a helicopter has the capability to lift the prefabricated bridge sections into place. The weight of the prefabricated, aluminum bridge sections range from 2,100 pounds to 4,800 pounds.

But while the helicopter is adding the finishing touches, it was the volunteers who literally laid the groundwork to prepare for the bridge. Trail enthusiasts of all kinds, hikers, horseback riders and mountain bike riders, were themselves the work force that planned and designed the construction for the bridge site and then hauled in all the construction materials on foot, on horseback and by mule trains. The bridge abutments, now in place and awaiting the bridge platform sections, were built mostly by hand, in steep and rugged terrain that was anything but friendly toward such an endeavor.

Holland, the Big Sandy Bridge Project Manager, organized and coordinated the 68 volunteers from 8 volunteer groups and the contributions from 10 private businesses in the construction of the bridge supports. His request to the California Army National Guard Aviation Support was accepted and approved in June of 2006 clearing the way for this final event which will complete the bridge crossing.

“When State Parks asked our club to volunteer some time to help them come up with a way to cross the Big Sandy Creek back in 1995,” said Holland, “it never crossed our minds that we were at the beginning of an eleven year project. I just want to thank every volunteer that helped with this project and especially the core group that each contributed several hundred hours to the project. “

One of core groups that supported a crucial component during the construction phase was the Back Country Horsemen of California. This organization provided the mule-train muscle to get the materials to the construction site. “This was one heck of a job,” said Toby Horst of the Back Country Horsemen of California. “Our mules packed in about 40,000 pounds of large concrete blocks for the bridge abutment construction and really earned their ration of hay for what they did. It was really exciting and we were delighted we had the mule-train muscle to help get it done.”

“For the California National Guard, this is a training mission,” said Jess Cooper, California State Parks. “But the rest of us want to express a high level of gratitude to the Guard and their helicopter crew for their heavy-lifting assistance. They get some added training, but we get an exceptional addition to the recreational trails of this State and thousands will soon be enjoying this new adventure. And we cannot thank our volunteers enough, because without them, there would be no bridge and no connection in this important trail system.”

Three state agencies, two federal agencies and three private organizations have worked in a partnership to provide essential elements toward the completion of this significant recreational benefit for the growing number of persons who travel the backcountry areas of California. Those groups are as follows:

- California Army National Guard – In charge of the aircraft operations to lift the bridge into place.
- California State Parks – The owner of the three bridge sections and the operator of Millerton Lake State Recreation Area, one end of the trail system. At the time the project was begun, State Parks was managing the bridge location area for the Bureau of Reclamation.
- California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection – The lead agency for fire protection and emergency response on standby at the site.
- Bureau of Reclamation – The bridge site is on Reclamation lands.
- Bureau of Land Management – The trail is through the Bureau’s San Joaquin River Gorge Management Area.
- San Joaquin River Trail Council – The Council has worked for nearly 11 years to provide this important trail linkage.
- Central California Off-Road Cyclists – Their volunteers have been the project’s lead group in the layout, design and construction for the past eleven years.
- Back Country Horsemen – Fifteen members of the club used five strings of 15 mules to pack in 40,000 pounds of concrete blocks for the bridge abutments. At 70 pounds a piece, that’s nearly 600 blocks.

In addition to the above organizations, another ten organizations provided support in other ways toward completing this project. Those organizations are listed in the Big Sandy Contact and Supporters List at the end of this release.

Coordinating Instructions for Press – Please follow to get to site

The site is remote and access is limited. It will not be open to the public during the lift, but press interested in covering this airlift can do so, as follows:

Saturday, June 9 -- If attending, MUST call:

Friday, before 5 p.m. -- (559) 822-2332

Saturday after 7 a.m. – (559)822-4363

0745	<i>Arrive at departure Meet point – (See directions, next page)</i>
0800	<i>Advance briefing and interview with crew members</i>
0815	<i>Depart via boat for sight overlooking bridge installation area</i>
0915	<i>Bridge segment lifted into place</i>
0945	<i>Bridge segment lifted into place.</i>
1000	<i>Aircraft departs scene – move to bridge location.</i>
1000 – 1630	<i>Anchor and bolt segments into place</i>

Be advised that it takes time to travel into the canyon via boat to the press vantage point. It is strongly advised that reporters not be late to insure that all can travel into the canyon and be prepared for the airlift. There may not be time to return for those who are late. Hiking boots, a hat, sunscreen and water are recommended.

Directions from Fresno: Take Highway 41 North, exit to Friant Road toward Millerton Lake, road turns into Millerton Road and keep going, turn left on Auberry Road, turn left on Wellbarn Road near Marshall Station, follow road through gate to MEET location (various people will be gathered at this location awaiting your arrival). Drive time from Fresno is about 40 minutes.

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